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Art

## Multimedia Marvels

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Forget paint and canvas.

The basic art supplies of the '90s are as likely to be blackened rooms "painted" with electronically sequenced sculptural constructions, lights, slides, film loops and audio tapes. That, at least, is the message emanating from two offbeat mixed-media installations now showing in spaces here devoted to the new. The Hirshhorn Museum's "Directions" gallery is featuring the multimedia work of the witty, inventive New York experimental filmmaker Ericka Beckman; the Media Gallery at the Washington Project for the Arts is showing a single projection piece by

See ART, B13, Col. 1

### ART, From B1

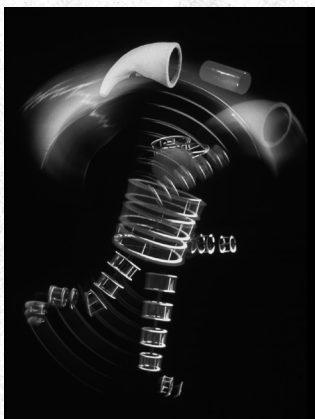
its current artist-in-residence, versatile architect-painter-performer Judith Barry, also of New York.

If it all sounds like post-studio art conceived by a generation of artists weaned on television and movies, it is. But together, these artists' works make a strong case that something new—or at least better—is in the wind, and that electronic multimedia work, often thin and makeshift until now, is moving into a mature phase. Barry has even given it a name: "cinematic architecture."

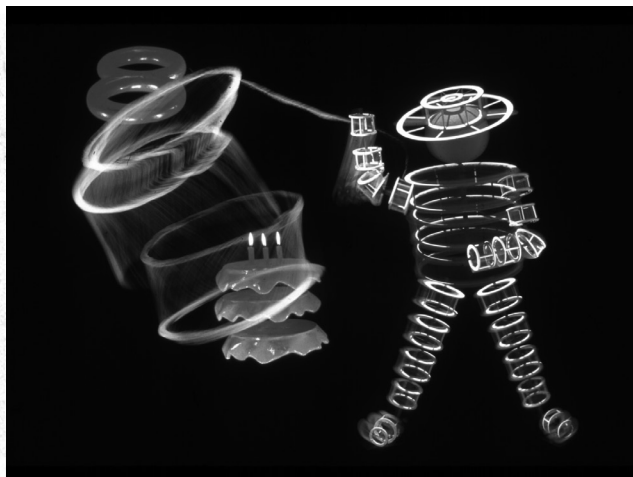
Beckman's show—her first in a museum—is the more ambitious undertaking, consisting of two room-size installations along with large color photographs and stills based on her films.

The highlight is "The Memory Core," a large, blackened, theater-like room entered through a velvet curtain. In it, as the short sequence begins, only a minimal stage set made from glowing white pipe and wood is visible. Soon, however, with the addition of projections and electronically sequenced movements, sound and light, the set becomes the star performer in Beckman's theater of the mind, gently leading the viewer's imagination (via visual hints and sounds) through a creaky door, down a stairway and into the basementlike space that serves as metaphor for the world of memory.

Here, as in Beckman's films, audio plays an important part in creating both mood and meaning, especially in the childlike chant—like the singing of a jump-rope rhyme—that reinforces the sense of moving into the



Ericka Beckman's "Horn Player."



Ericka Beckman's "Nanotech Players: Lasso Thrower," at the Hirshhorn.

past. A gong and sudden shift of scene into a Japanese garden then plunges the spectator from memory into the realm of imagination, as surely as Alice moved through the looking glass.

In the end, what we've experienced is an abstract narrative with a beginning, middle and end—all pretty amazing when you consider how abstract the essence of Beckman's conjuring really is. It is a measure of her extraordinary power as image-maker that she not only can evoke memory and imagination, she actually takes on the challenge of depicting them in an altogether convincing, hologram-like form that suddenly appears and hovers within the space.

The surrealists tried painting the realm of the mind, but their strategies now seem limited and outdated. Perhaps Beckman's will someday too, but for now her work is fresh, witty and welcome testimony to the new expressive potential of multimedia work, especially when in the hands of such an able and sophisticated practitioner.

Beckman's smaller installation—a pinball game of sorts titled "Nanotech Players"—is, like her photographs and stills, more fun when you've seen the experimental films on which her reputation is based. But the best of the large Cibachromes here—notably the apparition-like image of a sailing ship—have a haunting quality even on their own. Her show will continue at the Hirshhorn through July 23.